

How many kids waiting for affordable childcare in Hamilton is too many?^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

It's a very long wait for some children in Hamilton to find a spot in the city's subsidized health care system. Right now, there are 1,623 kids in that line.

In 2012, the province allocated \$36.9 million to overall childcare costs in Hamilton, an increase of 89 per cent since 2003, according to the Ministry of Education.

The city's annual childcare subsidy budget represents approximately \$22 million, says Jane Soldera, Director of Community Services Department Social Development & Early Childhood Services Division in Hamilton. At the moment, 3,779 children are receiving childcare fee subsidies, she reports.

Yet when it comes to offering subsidized childcare support to families in need, demand outstrips supply. In 2007-8, that demand went up by 18 per cent.

"By year end 2011," says Soldera, it had increased by "54 percent over the same time in 2010."

Since 2008, Hamilton has been dealing with that increased burden through the creation of a wait list. At the top of the list are kids in low-income households with special needs or those deemed in 'high-risk' situations (these kids are given access to the subsidy immediately).

Next on the list: kids from households that have a family income below Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-off (LICO) (In 2011, the before tax LICO was \$27,674 for a single person with a child). In priority three is the overflow from priority two.

How long is the wait?

Soldera admits it's "difficult to predict with accuracy how long someone will wait." Kids in priority two have been waiting for a place in subsidized childcare since February 2012, she says, while families in priority three have been waiting since January 2010.

What are they waiting for exactly?

For kids in subsidized care to either age out of the system or become ineligible due to an income increase in their parent or parents' situation.

What's the economic significance of the wait list?

"Hamilton's economy is suffering because of the large waitlist for childcare subsidies," says Sara Mayo, social planner at the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton. Mayo suggests that the "increase in the childcare subsidy waiting list since March mirrors a small but steady decrease in the number of social assistance recipients in Hamilton."

"If more childcare subsidies were available, the social assistance caseload could be decreasing at an even faster rate," she adds.

Lack of timely access to affordable childcare affects families variously in Hamilton. "If you've found a space but you need subsidy and there's a wait list, which there is, then you can't have care," says Marni Flaherty, CEO of Today's Family, a non-profit licensed childcare provider in Hamilton, and co-chair of the parent-family engagement committee for Hamilton.

But for Hamilton's population of lone-parent families, the majority of which are single mothers, the lack of affordable childcare can be even more serious. (After two-parent families, lone parent families headed by women are the second most common family type in the city.)

Traditionally this group is at increased risk for living in poverty. Lack of affordable care affects their ability to pull themselves out of financial distress by pursuing higher education and in some cases it prevents them from effectively participating in the labour force.

Catch-22 for many women

"So you're really stuck," says Flaherty. "You either have to quit school or your job, which is obviously not paying enough because you can't afford childcare." The system creates a frustrating catch-22 for many women, as well as for society at large.

"We know that for single mothers having a university education has the biggest impact on their future earnings and yet we do nothing to encourage it and we pay a price for that too," says Peter Graefe, professor of political science at McMaster. "We have a lot of women who

don't develop their human capital to use an economist's term...and over a 40-to-50-year lifespan their earnings are going to be lower and so is their ability to contribute to the collective coffers through taxation," he concludes.

Childcare's identity crisis: business or public service?

Flaherty, who has been working in childcare for the past three decades, says Ontario is falling behind in its commitment to offer affordable childcare and in her view it's because of a lack of a firm vision about the service. "Is it supposed to be a business where people are making money, or is it supposed to be a public service that is affordable, sustainable and accessible?" she asks.

Rather than focus solely on the subsidy system or serving a specific population, i.e. the poor, Graefe believes it would be wiser to for the provincial government to think about childcare as a "social infrastructure for everyone" and so proceed from there.

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